

Chapter III

THE CHARACTERS' VIEWPOINTS

After the necessary introduction of the themes and the characters of the novel, Jane Austen usually steps aside and lets her characters reveal themselves. When the first personal pronoun is used it does not necessarily represent the author speaking for herself, but may stand for a Jane Austen who for the moment has identified herself with one of her characters. The "I" is occasionally Jane Austen herself but not by any means always. In the second volume of Sense and Sensibility, the author begins the paragraph in this manner:

I come now to the relation of a misfortune,
which about this time befell Mrs. John Dashwood.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXXVI, page 252)

The "I" is only to some extent Jane Austen herself, for the "misfortune" is that Mrs. John Dashwood has invited Elinor and Marianne to a musical party simply because she wants to invite Lady Middleton; the author cannot really think it unfortunate that Mrs. John Dashwood should show some attention to her sisters-in-law, but she has identified herself with that selfish woman in order to strengthen the case against her. The reader needs only to reflect briefly on the train of causation to know that moral censure of Mrs. John Dashwood is being implied here.¹ Therefore, when the reader comes upon the first personal

¹Norman Page and Basil Blackwell, The Language of Jane Austen (Oxford, 1972), p. 22.

pronoun in Jane Austen's novels, he should beware lest he be led by it into thinking what is being said represents her own point of view.

The slanting of the narrative through the mental life of the principal character is an important element in many of Jane Austen's novels. In Emma, after Jane Austen has once made clear what Emma's limitations are, she appears much less in person as the narrator. Here, even the first introduction of Mr. Woodhouse is presented as nearly as possible from Emma's point of view, so that he appears in relation to her and therefore to the main theme of the novel:

She dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful.

(Emma, chapter I, page 20)

Moreover, in this novel there are scarcely any facts known to the reader that Emma herself does not know in some way, and the way Emma misinterprets them helps the reader interpret Emma's character and derive the right conclusion. The relationship between Frank and Jane, which Emma does not even suspect, is seen by means of her, and richly illuminates her; her mistaken conclusions point to the true ones. When Emma guesses that it is Mr. Dixon who has sent Jane the piano, the reader knows that Emma is wrong, and therefore begins to look for a more likely donor (which Colonel Campbell plainly is not) and so is in a position to notice Frank's ambiguous remark on the music that comes with the piano:²

²J.F. Burrows, Jane Austen's Emma (Sydney, 1968), p. 115.

Very thoughtful of Colonel Campbell, was not it? - He knew Miss Fairfax could have no music here. I honour that part of the attention particularly; it shows it to have been so thoroughly from the heart. Nothing hastily done; nothing incomplete. True affection only could have prompted it.

(Emma, chapter XXVIII, page 196)

On reading this, of course, the reader does not, and is not intended to, draw the right inference, but he is supposed to notice the evidence enough to see its strength when the truth is told.

The method of letting the heroine herself present as much of the action as possible also occurs in Pride and Prejudice. In this novel, the emphasis is on what Elizabeth feels and perceives, and not on what anyone else says or does, because the interest here is in her moral reform and the development of her emotional maturity. During and after her stay in Lambton, Elizabeth is presented, like Emma, by a kind of "reported-thought" process.³ With this method, the reader is never fully conscious that Jane Austen is directing what he ought to think; her appearances as narrator are hardly noticeable. What the author tells us, what the heroine perceives, and the conclusions the heroine then derives are so mingled that they are hardly separable; as, for example, in Elizabeth's reflection on Darcy:

If he had been wavering before, as to what he should do, which had often seemed likely, the advice and entreaty of so near a relation might settle every doubt, and determine him at once to be as happy as dignity unblemished

³ Andrew Wright, The Novels of Jane Austen (Middlesex, 1962), p. 67.

could make him. In that case he would return no more. Lady Catherine might see him in her way through town; and his engagement to Bingley of coming again to Netherfield must give way.

"If, therefore, an excuse for not keeping his promise should come to his friend within a few days, "she added, "I shall know how to understand it. I shall then give over every expectation, every wish of his constancy. If he is satisfied with only regretting me, when he might have obtained my affections and hand, I shall soon cease to regret him at all."

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter LXVII, page 267)

The first paragraph gives facts, but can be read as Elizabeth's assessment of them as well as Jane Austen's and it merges easily with the second paragraph -- Elizabeth's deduction from them.⁴

The brilliancy of Pride and Prejudice results in part from this narrative technique. When Elizabeth finally discovers how proud, prejudiced and, therefore, mistaken her judgment has been, many readers of Pride and Prejudice find that they too must acknowledge the same things with a feeling more or less similar to Elizabeth's. And this is because Jane Austen has invited us throughout the first half of the novel to identify ourselves with the heroine and to share at least some of her illusions. Elizabeth, of course, is never meant to speak for the impersonal narrator, but in the early sections and in many of the later ones, she is undeniably its **focus**. The readers, because of their partial identification with the heroine, are likely to find themselves sharing some of Elizabeth's prejudice,

⁴Ibid., p. 69.

and thus her ultimate self-discovery may also be their own.

In addition to the method of letting the heroine herself present as much action as possible, Jane Austen also takes her reader into the minds of the other characters, even minor ones. For instance, she takes us directly into the mind of Mary Crawford on finding Tom Bertram indifferent to her after his return to Mansfield:

It was very vexatious, and she was heartily sorry for it; but so it was; and so far from now meaning to marry the elder, she did not even want to attract him beyond what the simplest claims of conscious beauty required; his lengthened absence from Mansfield, without any thing but pleasure in view, and his own will to consult, made it perfectly clear that he did not care about her; and his indifference was so much more than equalled by her own, that were he now to step forth owner of Mansfield Park, the Sir Thomas complete, which he was to be in time, she did not believe she could accept him.

(Mansfield Park, chapter XII, page 141)

Then there are Maria and Julia Bertram, of whose vacuous minds we are afforded a glimpse; when they got acquainted with little Fanny Price, they react vigorously:

They could not but hold her cheap on finding that she had but two sashes, and had never learnt French; and when they perceived her to be little struck with the duet they were so good as to play, they could do no more than make her a generous present of some of their least valued toys, and leave her to herself, while they adjourned to whatever might be the favourite holiday sport of the moment, making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper.

(Mansfield Park, chapter II, page 51)

Besides saving the reader from the tedious viewing of this rather unhappy and not very interesting series of incidents, Jane Austen shows us the thoughts of the two Miss Bertrams, and even pretends to share their aversion to Fanny's inadequacies before giving herself and the two sisters away by the word "wasting", which intentionally casts doubt on the validity of the Miss Bertrams' reflections.⁵

In Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen sometimes indentifies herself with the viewpoints of the Lucases. After William Collins' proposal to Charlotte Lucas, this paragraph occurs:

Sir William and Lady Lucas were speedily applied to for their consent; and it was bestowed with a most joyful alacrity. Mr. Collins's present circumstances made it a most eligible match for their daughter, to whom they could give little fortune; and his prospects of future wealth were exceedingly fair. Lady Lucas began directly to calculate with more interest than the matter had ever excited before, how many years longer Mr. Bennet was likely to live; and Sir William gave it as his decided opinion, that whenever Mr. Collins should be in possession of the Longbourn estate, it would be highly expedient that both he and his wife should make their appearance at St. James's. The whole family in short were properly overjoyed on the occasion. The younger girls formed hopes of coming out a year or two sooner than they might otherwise have done; and the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XXII, page 93)

This pretends to be an objective narrative by an omniscient narrator. Objectively, it is "a most eligible match"; objectively, "the whole

⁵W.A. Craik, Jane Austen: The Six Novels (London, 1965), p. 95.

family were properly overjoyed, and the girls speak of coming out". However, the earlier exposure of defects in Mr. Collins' character, the surrounding circumstances and particularly Elizabeth's criticism make it quite clear that the passage does not represent the author's viewpoint. Rather the author has identified herself with the viewpoints of the Lucases, while maintaining the pose of narrator, and this is done in order to mock the pretensions of this shop-keeper's family.⁶

In a single passage, the narrator's viewpoints may vary in a delicately subtle way; unobtrusive transitions carry the reader from one viewpoint to another, and only the closest attention will enable him to search out the real intention of the message in question.

Jane Austen describes Fanny Price on her arrival at Mansfield Park:

Fanny Price was at this time just ten years old, and though there might not be much in her first appearance to captivate, there was, at least, nothing to disgust her relations. She was small of her age, with no glow of complexion, nor any other striking beauty; exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice; but her air, though awkward, was not vulgar, her voice was sweet, and when she spoke, her countenance was pretty. Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram received her very kindly, and Sir Thomas seeing how much she needed encouragement, tried to be all that was conciliating; but he had to work against a most untoward gravity of deportment -- and Lady Bertram, without taking half so much trouble, or speaking one word where he spoke ten, by the mere aid of a good-humoured smile, became immediately the

⁶Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

less awful character of the two.

(Mansfield Park, chapter II, page 49)

At first, every descriptive statement in this paragraph suggests that the author may be a neutral observer, sitting in the corner of the parlour at Mansfield Park, and remarking little Fanny Price as she makes her first appearance before her aunt and uncle; everything but what is described in the last few words, for there Jane Austen takes us directly into Fanny's mind to show her reaction to the meeting.

Another example is when Jane Austen introduces the Grants who come to Mansfield Parsonage after Mr. Norris's death:

The Grants, showing a disposition to be friendly and sociable, gave great satisfaction in the main among their new acquaintance. They had their faults, and Mrs. Norris soon found them out. The Dr. was very fond of eating, and would have a good dinner every day; and Mrs. Grant, instead of contriving to gratify him at little expense, gave her cook as high wages as they did at Mansfield Park, and was scarcely ever seen in her offices. Mrs. Norris could not speak with any temper of such grievances, nor of the quantity of butter and eggs that were regularly consumed in the house.

(Mansfield Park, chapter III, page 65)

The first sentence apparently conveys the impression the Grants make on the people of the neighborhood, a statement which we accept as objective. Then we proceed to the second, where our suspicions are aroused by the mention of Mrs. Norris, whose reactions we have already learned to distrust. If the Grants have faults, does Mrs. Norris know what they are? Obviously, the list set forth here only reflects her

own prejudices - as the word "grievances" afterwards suggests. Thus Jane Austen slyly shifts the point of view from herself to Mrs. Norris, one of her most unpleasant characters.⁷

When the narrator speaks from the point of view of a particular character, we know only that such and such is that character's belief, whereas when the narrator speaks impersonally, we can simply accept what we are told. Actually the reader always finds some cues in the passage to tell him whether it is the point of view of the impersonal narrator or of the character, for example, in the two early accounts of Mr. Weston in Emma:

The event had every promise of happiness for her friend. Mr. Weston was a man of unexceptionable character, easy fortune, suitable age, and pleasant manners; and there was some satisfaction in considering with what self-denying, generous friendship she had always wished and promoted the match;

(Emma, chapter I, page 19-20)

Mr. Weston was a native of Highbury, and born of a respectable family, which for the last two or three generations had been rising into gentility and property. He had received a good education, but on succeeding early in life to a small independence...

(Emma, chapter II, page 26)

Everything in this second account lies within Emma's knowledge. The facts in the former passage are intimately related to Emma's hopes for Miss Taylor whereas, those in the latter are comparatively

⁷Craik, op. cit., p. 99.

remote from Emma's concerns. Emma's implied presence is more definitely marked in the former passage by such cues as "her friend", "her satisfaction in considering". In the latter passage, however, there are no such personal touches. Each passage, is skilfully made appropriate to its context: the former is part of Emma's private reflections in the first chapter while the latter is the impersonal narrator's introduction of the character.⁸

Beyond the narrative of the impersonal narrator, thus lies the narrative carried on by one or more of the characters, and the reader is usually provided with some cues to show whether the viewpoint belongs to the narrator or to the characters.

⁸ Burrows, op. cit., p. 120.

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